IMPLEMENTATION OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING IS ONE OF

THE SOLUTIONS FOR THE CURRENT PROBLEMS OF

EFL/ESL TEACHING IN INDIAN SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to present the problems and difficulties of EFL/ESL teaching in an era of globalization and internationalization in non-native English-speaking countries like India. The focus is on the challenges faced by the schools and suggesting the learning styles and pedagogical solutions. This is possible by following the second language acquisition theories such as comprehensible input, output, interaction, context and motivation integrated together with cooperative learning strategies. While it is never easy to implement, when all the critical elements are in place, it is very powerful. This paper reviews the theory underlying the use of Cooperative Learning (CL) conducted at the High School level, and the ways it may be used appropriately in High School classes to seek solutions.

KEYWORDS: Cooperative Learning, ESL/EFL Teaching Problems, Positive Interdependence, Individual Accountability, Quality of Group Processing, Interpersonal and Cooperative Skills, Social Skills and Instructor as a Facilitator

Original Article

INTRODUCTION

Current Problems and the Teaching Situation of ESL/EFL in India

The teaching and learning of English today in India is characterized not only by a diversity of schools but also inappropriate linguistic environments. In the process of language teaching and acquisition, pervasive classroom procedures are followed. Text books are prepared in such a way aiming at the success rate in the examination. Teachers also believe that the higher success rate is a good indication of better teaching but at the cost of no language acquisition.

As per the statistics, India stands the second largest country where English is spoken. As per Wikipedia, 10.35% of Indian population speaks English at a rough estimation of 125 million people. Indian parents aspire their children to go to English Medium schools. But often students who leave such schools with Secondary School Certificate speak a language that would not be understood in native English speaking countries such as the UK and the USA (BBC). Is India heading toward Hinglish while English is the lingua franca? Do Indians still believe that learning English is for social mobility and individual personality? If it is the scenario, correct language acquisition is an essential factor. There are several factors that contribute to the problems of EFL teaching in India. Some of them are given below.

Classroom Heterogeneity

A heterogeneous class has different kinds of learners constituting approximately the same age group but with different abilities, skills and emotional needs. But in a homogeneous class the learners are almost similar in their abilities. *According to Penny* & *Ur* heterogeneous classes present problems for both the teacher and the students. Classroom heterogeneity is one of the main problems in teaching English in the Indian schools. The students in the Indian classrooms in any city or town or even in village usually constitute a mixed ability class. In addition, linguistic heterogeneity is a common phenomenon in such classes. It is well known that students come from different mother tongue, dialect, cultural, social, economic and family backgrounds in India. Another social evil that still exists in Indian classrooms is 'caste'. The performance of students is affected by this socio-economic status of the caste. Apart from the above stated aspects, the history of education in the family certainly contributes to the performance of the students. This heterogeneity not only affects the other subjects like Social Studies, Science but also English Language. This heterogeneous aspect is a great barrier in the acquisition of language skills.

AnthonyS Bryk (1988), professor in University of Chicago (1988), in his article *'Heterogeneity of variance in experimental studies: a challenge to conventional interpretations'* expressed his view that language learning is also affected by such factors.

The National Policy on Language Education

"…English has become so much a part of our national habit English cannot continue to occupy the place of stage language as in the past" (*Education Commission* 1948). The National Policy on Language Education (1986) recommended the Three Language Formula to provide facilities for teaching a mother tongue or minority language. Reiteration of this formula for functional and integrative purposes created many difficulties. The *Three Language Formula* was first devised for school education CABE (Central Advisory Board of Education) in 1956 and it was formalized by *Kothari Education Commission* in 1964. Acquiring three languages is a burden to the students. This affects language acquisition in the long run as students are not in a position to spend enough of time on each language.

Recommendations of the *National Advisory Committee* which was set up in 1992 to suggest ways to reduce the academic burden on school students and the report of the group to examine the feasibility of implementing the recommendations in 1993 are to discourage competition among individuals but to encourage and reward group activities to give a boost to CL in schools. Both the recommendation and the comment clearly favour the use of CL strategies in formal education in India.

The Curriculum

A document of the **National Curriculum Framework for School Education** (2000) stated that the Three Language Formula must be implemented more vigorously. But the document does not state the curriculum objectives for each language separately. The common curriculum objectives have been followed ever since the Three Language Formula was introduced. For instance, the curriculum objectives of Telugu or Tamil as the first language or mother tongue, most often, they are the cut and paste of the curriculum objectives of some other second or third language. Each language teaching is unique and the same is in the case of imparting English. Therefore, there must be specific teaching objectives relevant to each specific language. As of now, it is not the case in reality. Besides, the quantum of syllabus taught, and the year of starting teaching English differ from state to state. There is no uniformity in the curriculum. This is one of the

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major problems in teaching EFL/ESL.

The Textbooks

The text books are major tools in the hands of English language teachers and students for language acquisition in the process of teaching and learning. The academic problems related to the text book are numerous. First of all the scarcity prevails. They are insufficient, not clear and the content is irrelevant for communicative approach of teaching. Problems related to the content, content organization and styles of presentations do exist. There are no proper illustrations, pictures relevant to the topics. Task based exercises and assignments are not given. Effective measures to produce a curriculum book are not implemented. Characteristics of a book like adequate subject matter, suitable vocabulary, structures, and style of presentation of the content are missing. As a result, text books hinder the teaching and learning process.

The Teacher Education

The main reason for the declining language standards in Indian schools is lack of systematic teacher education. The teachers are not able to differentiate the techniques of teaching literature and language skills. The training provided to the teachers is outdated and not as per the current trends of teaching English. As a result the standards in the schools are deteriorating. Teachers are still following lecture method of teaching in isolation while there are methods like communicative approach, cooperative learning, and many other approaches. There is every need for the revival of teacher education.

The Language-Teaching Scenario in the Classroom

The language-teaching scenario in the classroom has enormous challenges. It is quite apparent that the English language teachers are not able to cater the practical needs of the students. The methodology, style, and pattern of teaching the first, second and third language is almost similar. English is taught as a subject rather than a language. As a result the students are unable to put their learning into practice. The evaluation system has its own visible challenges. Listening as a skill is not tested in the exams in most of the schools. The English language teachers are not familiar with the new techniques and developments in ELT pedagogy. Robert Bellarmine observed that the students are exposed to small quantity and atrociously poor quality of English. It is a known fact that teaching of English in India is more examination-oriented. Besides there is very less interaction among the different language teachers to discuss the language teaching and learning process. Teachers of different languages rarely get a chance of sharing their experiences in new emerging trends in teaching languages.

The Level of Introduction of English

In this regard there is no one system followed in the Indian-school education system. A 2003 NCERT study shows that English is introduced in Class I or Class III by 26 States or Union Territories out of 35. Only seven States or Union Territories have introduced it in Class IV or Class V as there are different types of schools. *Kurrien* (2005), thus, identifies the four types of schools in India. They are English-medium Private/Government-aided Elite Schools, new English-medium Private Schools, Government-aided Regional English-medium Schools and Government Regional-medium Schools run by district and educational authorities. In all these types of schools syllabus and the teaching-staff differ in all matters including qualifications and proficiency. Private English-medium Schools may differ in the learning opportunities they offer, and this may be reflected in differential language attainment. For example, pupils in schools with class libraries read better than those in schools where reading is restricted to monotonous texts and frequent routine tests of

spelling lists.

Mathew (1997:41) found, in a curriculum-implementation study, that the 2,700-odd schools affiliated to the CBSE differ in the culture arising from the type of management, funding, geographic location, salary structure, teacher motivation and competence, the type of students they cater for and the type of parents. *(Final Report (a summary): CBSE-ELT Curriculum Implementation Study). Prabhu* (1987:3) suggests, "*Typologies of teaching situations should, thus be seen as an aid to investigating the extent of relevance of a pedagogic proposal, rather than as absolute category.*"

There are several other problems related to the teaching of English in India. For example, large classes, finding required number of competent teachers, lack of resources like text-books, library, improper school-plant etc. are can't but to be mentioned.

IMPLEMENTATION OF COOPERATVE LEARNING

If there is any one educational technique that has firm empirical support, it is cooperative learning. The research in this area is the oldest research tradition in American Social Psychology. The first study was done in 1897; there were 90 years of research, hundreds of studies. There is probably more evidence validating the use of CL than there is for any other aspect of education. Cooperative learning is one of the best options to overcome the above sated problems as it creates optimal schooling experiences for the EFL/ESL high school students. The richness of this method is that it integrates the theories of second language acquisition such as 'the comprehensible input' *(Krashen),* the 'comprehensible output' *(Swain),* 'the interaction in context' *(Kagan)* and the 'affective domain of motivation' (Gardener).

Gardener (1985) opined that in CL, the learners work and contribute to the group to learn the language as there is inherent desire to contribute to the group work and they also get satisfaction by doing the activities together in a team. According to *Krashen*, "*We acquire language in only one way: when we understand the messages in that language, when we receive comprehensible input.*" He also argued that comprehensible input was "*the only true cause of second-language acquisition.*" '*Teaching and Learning in the Affective Domain*' written by *Smith* & *Ragan*, focuses on the learner's attitudes, motivation, and values. From a motivational perspective, *Slavin* stated that cooperative goal structure puts the group members in a situation where they have to work together to obtain their personal goals. The individual success depends on the success of the group. Therefore cooperative learning and the communicative approach enhances the students' language learning as well as development of motivation towards learning English as a foreign language.

It is believed, by carrying out this study, that cooperative learning can receive more attention and enjoy more popularity among EFL teachers at all high school grade levels, so that English education in India can actually equip the students with communicative competence. Educating High School pupils with adequate English communicative skills is important to India, especially now, when India is striving to join the world by trying to be one of the best members in this global village in the 21st century.

Cooperative Learning

In the words of *Johnson* and *Johnson,* and *Holubec* learners work together to attain group goals that cannot be obtained by working alone or competitively. *Slavin* defined cooperative learning as "*the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and one another's learning.*" CL involves more than placing students in groups and asking them to work together. Besides CL is defined as a system of concrete teaching and learning techniques, rather than an approach, in which students are active agents in the process of learning through small group

structures so that they work together to maximize their own and each other's learning.

Cooperative learning can be operationally defined in terms of different elements which when applied or implemented together distinguish it from other of learning in High School education in India. In general, there are six major factors that define CL and to make CL successful. They are:

Positive Interdependence

Johnson and *Johnson* explained that the students in cooperative learning believe that they are linked with others in a way that one cannot succeed unless the other members of the group succeed. They also explained that with positive interdependence students developed an awareness that they needed to help each other to ensure that all members had an understanding of a concept before moving on. Positive interdependence facilitates promotive interaction in CL because students recognize that they are dependent on each other for success. Within CL situations, students have two responsibilities: (a) to learn the assigned material and (b) to ensure that all members of the group learn the assigned material.

Individual Accountability

In this research individual accountability was an important element of CL because it holds the individual accountable for their own learning. It provides for each student believing that it is important for him/her to learn the material. As a result, students work hard to learn the content during the cooperative activity, because they know they will be responsible for it at an individual level, even though the content is discussed by the group. Individual accountability also gives feedback to students regarding any misconceptions they may have, which can then be revised. It helps to prevent the "*free-rider effect*" or "*hitchhiking*" where individuals within a group exert observable minimal effort, but reap the rewards of those individuals who exert maximal effort within the group. In *Sharan*, a similar concept, known as "*social loafing*" *occurs when* "*individual members…reduce their effort without [italics added] other members realizing that they are doing so, [as a result] many people tend to work less hard.*"

Quality of Group Processing

In forming cooperative groups, great effort has been made to establish productive group dynamics through positive interdependence, promotive group interaction, and effective social skills. Hence group processing gives students the opportunity to evaluate the functioning of their own group as well as individuals' contribution for the success of the group. In view of *Johnson* and others successful cooperative learning has been accomplished through group processing. In terms of *Johnson* group processing enables learning groups to focus on group maintenance. It facilitates the learning of social skills as well as ensures the members receive feedback on their participation and reminds students to practice cooperative and collaborative skills consistently.

Johnson and *Johnson* emphasized that this process be integrated as a key element to any CL session by allocating time for it to happen and having the students discuss it openly. They also viewed that group processing involves having the students reflect on the things that contribute to positive group functioning and those things that contribute to negative functioning. There is an important interplay that occurs during group processing where students use "*their social skills to help maintain effective working relationships within the group.*"

Teaching of Cooperative and Interpersonal Skills

Teaching of cooperative skills is another important element in CL. It is very essential for the success and progress of the group for their group achievement. As no one is born with interpersonal and group skills, the students have to acquire such skills. Within the cooperative learning situations, cooperative skills are learnt by participating in real classroom group activities as teachers structure their lessons to make the students compete in the group for the common good of the group. As a result, the students become skilful in communicating, building team spirit, managing conflict, maintaining trust and providing leadership *(Johnson 1991).*

Therefore, teaching cooperative skills becomes an important prerequisite for academic learning because achievement improves as students become more effective in learning from each other. This flows naturally from the most crucial cooperative learning element, *positive interdependence*. In the opinion of TESOLers for social responsibility (www.tesolers4sr.org), teaching cooperative skills as a value involves taking the feeling of "*All for one, one for all.*" Thus, cooperative skills are obtained while working in groups in CL. The academic learning improves as students become more effective in learning from each other with cooperative skills such as checking that others understand, asking for and giving reasons, disagreeing politely and responding politely to disagreement. The other skills include encouraging others to participate and responding to encouragement to participate. Students must learn cooperative skills for the groups to run smoothly.

Explicit Attention to the Teaching of Social Skills

In contrast to the strictly academic goals of the most-group work in high school English instruction, the most important objective of CL is the interpersonal communication and human relations skills. As students may not know social skills, they must be taught explicitly how to cooperate with others. For instance, teachers teach the social skills like how to greet the group, listen to the opinions of others, asking for help, following the instructions, disagree appropriately, make an apology and so on. Such skills can also be acquired by role playing, modeling, and discussing the components of particular social skills. *Cooper* felt that it is important for the teacher to model these behaviours, and attitudes, and give recognition to groups who practice them appropriately to reinforce them in all groups.

Instructor as a Facilitator

In addition to the above discussed elements, instructor as a facilitator is to be considered as the most prominent element. In contrast to collaborative-group or small-group or/and small projects where students are left on their own ideas and conduct their work without much intervention of the teacher, CL involves the instructor as a facilitator, monitor or guide and consultant in the CL process. The teacher does not sit with a group as it might disrupt the student-centred advantage of CL. Therefore, the teacher will keep on circulating actively and intentionally among the groups in order to offer encouragement, reinforce positive instances of good social behaviour, clarify the doubts in the tasks, catalyzing the dialogue, issuing tasks or handouts timely, introducing the questions timely to promote elaboration and higher-order of thinking among the cooperative groups. Teacher as a facilitator needs to be very careful to overly directive or involving himself/herself, or authoritative. He/she should function as a learned peer or coach by interacting with the students in a friendly, informal, personal and dialogic fashion. He/she needs to be different from the traditional methods of teaching, for instance, lecture-discussion format. As a facilitator he/she gets an opportunity to interact with the students in small groups and know their students' level of thinking, styles of communication, interpersonal and social skill and so on.

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RESULTS AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The results from this study may have implications at the theoretical and practical levels. But CL implementation provides higher order thinking, reinforces listening to others in group and gives a chance for immediate feedback. *Johnson* (2003) explained that CL is a distinct theory that guides and summarizes research. The research is validated, refined and modified in the process. The research on CL implementation yet reveals inadequacies that lead to further refinement of the theory and new research studies.

In the traditional classroom setting in the Indian schools today, teachers are striving to separate students from one another and have them work on their own. Having students work alone competitively or individually is a common phenomenon. This is a dominant feature in the classroom teaching and learning process today. On the contrary the present research in Don Bosco High School, in Guntur District, Andhra Pradesh, suggests that when examining the students' learning cooperatively and traditionally, a very interesting paradox develops. The paradox is that when students work cooperatively, they learn more effectively as there is student-student interaction. There is a vast difference between the traditional teaching and CL.

The data collected in this study suggested that students achieved more in cooperative interaction than in competitive or individualistic interaction in traditional classroom. The results indicated that CL seems to be much more powerful in producing communicative competence and academic achievement than the other interaction patterns. In addition, students were more positive about learning subject areas, more positive about each others when they learned cooperatively than when they learned alone, competitively or individualistically regardless of the existence of heterogeneity in the Indian schools. Furthermore, students were more effective interpersonally as a result of working cooperatively than when they worked in traditional classroom. The other aspects observed after the application of CL in this study at Don Bosco High School are:

- Students with cooperative experiences were able to take the perspective of others.

- Students were more positive about taking part in group work, and had better developed interaction skills.

- Students had a more positive expectation about working with others than the students from traditional teaching in a competitive or individualistic setting.

Hence by investigating the impact of CL implementation on student learning outcomes, it may help to further validate the theory and models that form the foundation of CL. It will provide important information regarding the extent to which CL as an instructional strategy contributes to high school students learning English for life. Further research into this teaching approach may also provide important information about any possible weaknesses or barriers.

CONCLUSIONS

The truth of this assertion can be seen in the rich theory, research, and practice surrounding Cooperative Learning. There can now be little doubt that Cooperative Learning is appropriate to High School education in India. While it is never easy to implement, when all the critical elements are in place, it is very powerful. This thesis reviews the theory underlying the use of Cooperative Learning conducted at the High School level, and the ways it may be used appropriately in High School classes.

There were a number of limitations and delimitations of this study that must be noted. The sample size for this study was the first limitation. Also, the students involved were only 9th class High School students. The number of students involved was only 70. These limitations reduced the power and generalizability of the results. However, within the context of this High School, this study provided important and useful information regarding the impact of this CL method on the outcomes of the students in communicative competence and their motivation level. Another important limitation of this study was that only one skill was assessed. This limited the generalizability of the results for other skills. It would be advantageous to compare multiple levels of high school students although the results are generally positive.

In the training provided for the teachers, they were advised not to intervene much during the course of discussion of the students and let the students lead the process and discussion, and they were to act as guides and not lecturers or tutorial leaders. However, different facilitators may have had different thresholds, for when they felt they should intervene and to what degree they structure their feedback. This also may have affected the group process and functioning, which may have had an effect on learning. Also, some facilitators will be better than others. For example, some facilitators may be better at asking deeper probing questions to guide student discussion. Some may find it difficult to act as guides when students are not on the right track and end up giving the students the answers. Some facilitators may establish a more comfortable environment, where the students feel free to discuss their ideas. All these factors may have had an influence on the student learning potential.

In this empirical study, a pretest-post-test group research design was used. The sample population was from two classes of the High School students in central Andhra Pradesh. There were totally 70 students involved in this study. The experimental group was taught applying CL method of teaching for two months. The methods applied wereThree-Step-Interview, Learning Together, Talk Pair, Inside-Outside Circle, and Student-Teams-Achievement Division. Grammar Translationand Lecture Method along with some of the Audio-Lingual Approach were used for the control group.

Rabindranath Tagore stated, "*let us unite, not in spite of our differences, but through them. For differences can never be wiped away, and life would be so much the poorer without them. Let all human races keep their own personalities, and yet come together, not in a uniformity that is dead, but in a unity that is living.*"

The widespread use of cooperative learning is due to a number of factors. It is purely based on theory and practice. The research was validated and operationalized into clear procedures that English language teachers can use in real classroom situation. This combination makes cooperative learning a powerful learning methodology. Cooperative learning can have far reaching results when skillfully applied and practiced. The sparkling results and positive outcomes of CL preventing a wide range of the problems of the heterogeneous classes existing in the Indian high schools is a priceless success.

Depending upon the conclusions drawn from the study, *Cooperative Learning* is, thus, recommended to be integrated into the High School English instruction in India in order to solve the current problems of EFL/ESL teaching in Indian Schools.

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